

Leadership Qualities: Communicating Vision

Dr. Kenneth Boa

A man was struggling to get his washing machine through the front door of his home as his neighbor was walking past. The neighbor, being a *good* neighbor, stopped and asked if he could help. The man breathed a sigh of relief and said, "That would be great. I'll get it from the inside and you get it from the outside. We should be able to handle this quickly."

But after five minutes of continual struggle, they were both exhausted. Wiping the sweat from his brow, the neighbor said, "This thing is bigger than it looks. I don't know if we'll ever be able to get it into your house."

"Into my house? I'm trying to get this thing *out* of my house!"

Few things are more vital than clear communication, particularly for leaders. The great Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini was notoriously bad at being able to communicate what he wanted to his musicians. His fits of frustration at his own lack of communication skills were legendary. After trying several times to convey something very particular to a trumpet player, he threw up his hands and shouted, "God tells me how the music should sound, but you stand in the way!" On another occasion, during a rehearsal of Debussy's *La Mer*, he found himself yet again at a loss for words to describe the effect he hoped to achieve from a particular passage. He thought for a moment, then took a silk handkerchief from his pocket and tossed it high in the air. The mesmerized musicians watched its slow and graceful descent through the air. "There," said the maestro, "play it like that."¹

It is one thing to have vision, but without clear communication, vision will never become reality. Until others have understood the vision well enough to articulate it themselves, they cannot be expected to pursue it with passion. Leonard Sweet wisely reminds us, "It's not people who are right who change the world. It's people who can communicate their definition of right to others who change the world."²

Casting God's Vision

When God provided David with a vision of the Jerusalem temple, the king wanted to be personally instrumental in making that dream a reality. But the Lord told David that the job of building the temple would be given to Solomon, David's son and successor. David chose not to view himself as having been cut out of the action. Instead, he energetically undertook his new charge – that of instilling his vision and passion for the temple in Solomon and enlisting his unqualified support:

King David rose to his feet and said: "Listen to me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house as a place of rest for the ark of the covenant of the Lord, for the footstool of our God, and I made plans to build it. But God said to me, 'You are not to build a house for my Name, because you are a warrior and have shed blood.... Solomon your son is the one who will build my house and my courts, for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father. I will establish his kingdom forever if he is unswerving in carrying out my commands and laws, as is being done at this time.'

¹ Clifton Fadiman (ed.), *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), p. 548.

² Leonard Sweet, *Aqua Church* (Loveland, CO: 1999), p. 167.

“So now I charge you in the sight of all Israel and of the assembly of the Lord, and in the hearing of our God: Be careful to follow all the commands of the Lord your God, that you may possess this good land and pass it on as an inheritance to your descendants forever.

“And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever. Consider now, for the Lord has chosen you to build a temple as a sanctuary. Be strong and do the work.”

Then David gave his son Solomon the plans for the portico of the temple, its buildings, its storerooms, its upper parts, its inner rooms and the place of atonement. He gave him the plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the Lord and all the surrounding rooms, for the treasuries for the dedicated things.... He also gave him the plan for the chariot, that is, the cherubim of gold that spread their wings and shelter the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

“All this,” David said, “I have in writing from the hand of the Lord upon me, and he gave me understanding in all the details of the plan.”

David also said to Solomon his son, “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the Lord is finished. The divisions of the priests and Levites are ready for all the work on the temple of God, and every willing man skilled in any craft will help you in all the work. The officials and all the people will obey your every command.

1 Chronicles 28:2-21

Notice how David proceeded. First, he made it clear that the vision had come from God (vv. 2-3). Second, he informed Solomon that his role would be to lead the charge in building the temple (vv. 6-7). Such a task would require total devotion to the Lord and to the work. A halfhearted effort wouldn't get the job done (vv. 8-10). Third, David assured the people that this enormous task would be accomplished because God would enable Solomon to get the job done (v. 6). Fourth, David gave his son sufficient detail about the temple that Solomon could visualize what it would look like (vv. 11-19). Finally, after casting the vision, the king gave his son another dose of encouragement (vv. 20-21).

David actively participated in preparing his successor. He passed the baton to his son publicly and privately by endowing his son with the vision for the temple. One of the most significant tasks of a leader is to transmit the organizational vision to others.

Acts 29

The most influential leader the world has ever known, Jesus of Nazareth, modeled this for us. In fact, it could be said that the entire Bible is a vision-casting book that invites us not only to look ahead to God's promises for the future, but also to participate in their realization. God has granted us the immeasurable privilege of participating in his work, and he offers us “a slice of the action” that will have enduring consequences. James Emery White writes:

You were given life because God had a dream for you. Individually, specifically, by name. You were no accident. God willed you into existence, and He not only gave you life, but He also

invested you with promise and potential. Within you is the opportunity to join with God in fulfilling the great adventure birthed in His mind for you from eternity.³

The book of Acts is the glorious story of Christ's vision being realized, but if we open our Bibles to Acts 29 we will discover that there is no Acts 29. The reason there is no Acts 29 in the Bible is because it is being written right now by each of us as the good news of Jesus Christ is being proclaimed and lived out all over the world. In Acts 1:8, Luke (the author of Acts) gives us the outline for this volume through something Jesus told his followers just before his ascension: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." We are active participants in that last phrase; we are witnesses charged with taking the life of Christ "to the ends of the earth."

At the end of Acts, Paul is under house arrest. He's made it to Rome, which was near the ends of the earth in the first century, and he knows that if the gospel takes root in Rome, it will spread all over. So Luke tells us, "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 28:30-31). That's the end.

Now, for any modern-day readers of the book of Acts, when we get to this statement, we wonder what happens next. Does Paul make it to Caesar with his appeal? Does he live or does he die? But Luke never tells us. What matters is that Paul has invested his entire life in helping God's glorious vision become a reality. And he handed the baton off to men like Timothy and Titus, and they handed it off to faithful men and women who passed it to others. Down through the centuries the baton got passed until someone placed it in your hands and said, "Go, be his witness to the ends of the earth."

The Apostle John records for us a time when Jesus imparted his vision to his disciples in the fourth chapter of his Gospel. After his disciples returned from buying food, Jesus surprised them by telling them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about" (v. 32). At first they assumed he meant physical food, but he was referring to another kind of nourishment – that of participating in God's will: "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (vv. 34-35).

Before the disciples arrived on the scene, the Samaritan woman with whom Jesus had been talking had gone to tell the people of her village about the man who knew everything she ever did. When Jesus told his disciples to look at the fields that were ripe for harvest, it may be that he was referring to the Samaritans who were on their way to talk with him. This passage illustrates how Jesus constantly sought to communicate a greater vision of the Father's will to his disciples. Dr. Hans Finzel, Executive Director of a large church-planting organization, writes:

Though much of my job as a CEO is communicating our vision and selling our dream out there among the public constituents, my insiders need to hear from me just as much if not more. In fact, I expend as much energy on internal as on external communications. I never assume anymore that even my closest associates can read my mind – I've learned too much watching false information spread.⁴

³ James Emery White, *Life-Defining Moments* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), p. 69.

⁴ Hans Finzel, *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2000), p. 115.

Once a vision is cast, it may need to be cast again – several times. Since God’s vision always surpasses human comprehension, it requires persistence on the part of leaders to make sure everyone catches it and remembers it.

Ultimately, God’s vision must be transmitted by the Spirit of God. This principle was demonstrated in the Old Testament. When the Arameans tried to capture the prophet Elisha, his servant despaired, saying, “Oh, my lord, what shall we do?” (2 Kings 6:15). Elisha’s response communicated a vision of God’s control over the situation:

“Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, “O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

2 Kings 6:16-17

Paul expanded on this principle in his writings to the church at Corinth. “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14); “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4). The implications of the life of Christ will be lost to an unbeliever apart from the convicting work of the Holy Spirit.

But for those of us who have the Holy Spirit living in us, we are called to be kingdom builders who play an active role in the realization of God’s vision. Through mentoring relationships, we enlist others in this grand scheme of redemption that God planned out before the foundations of the world were set. We recruit men and women to participate in a vision that will have eternal ramifications, eternal consequences. This is the longing of every heart: to participate in something that will outlive them.

Steve always dreamed of owning his own business, but more than that, Steve truly believed in his dream to put affordable computers in every home and office. He really believed that it would revolutionize the world. So he took the plunge and started his own computer company. The only problem was that he knew computers; he didn’t know business. He needed the best CEO he could get, and that meant John Sculley, CEO of Pepsi-Cola. Somehow Steve had to convince Sculley to leave his prominent position at one of the most prestigious and profitable companies in the world and run Steve’s fledgling company.

Somehow, some way, Steve managed to schedule a meeting with John Sculley. Mr. Sculley listened patiently to the young man’s presentation. He even allowed Steve to schedule another meeting. Finally, after several appointments, Sculley introduced Steve to reality: “You’d have to give me a million-dollar salary, a million-dollar signing bonus and a million-dollar severance package.”

Steve was shocked. He couldn’t afford anything close to those figures. Still, his boldness and passion blurted words out of his mouth: “You’ve got it. Even if I have to pay for it out of my own pocket.”

Sculley didn’t become CEO of a multi-national corporation by being foolish. He knew a bluff when he heard one. “Steve, I’d love to be an adviser, but I don’t think I can come.”

Steve dropped his head, took a long breath and issued a challenge that pierced Sculley to the core. Looking him right in the eye, Steve simply asked, “Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world?” John Sculley resigned from Pepsi-Cola and took Steve Jobs up on his offer to lead a fledgling computer company called Apple. And together they really did change the world.⁵

⁵ Adapted from John Sculley, *Odyssey* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 56-91.

God placed in each of us a yearning for significance. Yet few of us actually devote our lives to great endeavors. The message of Christianity tells us that we can participate in something that stretches beyond our brief lives on earth. By passing on the vision of God to the next generation of his people, we can have a hand in eternity.

Casting the Vision at Home

It is one thing to have vision; it is quite another to communicate that vision to others to enable them to embrace and internalize it. Those who follow Christ are commissioned to communicate the vision of newness of life to others within their spheres of influence. The obvious place for this to start is in the home with our own children. In his book *Visioneering*, Andy Stanley writes:

The most significant visions are not cast by great orators from a stage. They are cast at the bedsides of our children. The greatest visioncasting opportunities happen between the hours of 7:30 and 9:30 P.M. Monday through Sunday. In these closing hours of the day we have a unique opportunity to plant the seeds of what could be and what should be. Take advantage of every opportunity you get.⁶

The central biblical passage concerning parents' responsibility to create an environment in which their children will hear and embrace the teachings and principles of Scripture is the great *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Because people cannot give away what they do not possess, it is first necessary that parents know and love the Lord before they can hope to instill spiritual truth in the hearts of the next generation. Only those who love the Lord themselves will be effective in passing on this love to others.

Many people were raised by parents who did not love God in an all-encompassing way. There was a great disparity between what the parents said they wanted their children to do and the way they actually lived their lives. These parents use the classic statement, "Do as I say, not as I do." There's something inherently wrong about that. Such a lack of integrity undermines a person's ability to communicate their vision in a way that will infect others. Communication involves more than words. It involves *logos* (words and concepts), *ethos* (behavior and character) and *pathos* (passion and sympathy). Clear communication is borne of what you say, what you do and who you are. There must be integrity and alignment in order for your communication to be credible and persuasive.

Many parents have discovered the futility of trying to raise their children to have moral standards they themselves do not possess. It is pointless to try to get children to obey God without loving him, and it is impossible for parents to teach their children to love God if they themselves do not.

This passage also underscores the fact that vision is imparted in both formal and informal ways. In these verses, parents are told to impress God's commandments on their children not only in more structured settings ("when you sit at home"), but also in unstructured and spontaneous ways ("when you walk along the road"). When people are serious about knowing God, they begin to incarnate and exhibit what they speak. Spiritual and moral principles are best conveyed in the laboratory of life; they are conveyed as much through character as they are through words. Truth is most effectively proclaimed through the consistency of words and work.

⁶ Andy Stanley, *Visioneering* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1999), p. 114.

The message of Proverbs 2 is that wisdom can only be found if it is sought intentionally:

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

Proverbs 2:1-5

The reason this father can implore his son to pursue wisdom is because the son has seen the father do the same. Parents who try to instruct their children to fear the Lord without fearing the Lord themselves are like people who try to describe something they haven't seen. Larry Crabb expands upon the power and importance of casting a vision for another person:

What would it be like if we had a vision for each other, if we could see the lost glory in ourselves, our family, and our friends? What would the effect on your sons and daughters be if they realized that you were caught up with the possibilities of restored glory, of what they could become – not successful, talented, good looking, or rich but kind, strong and self-assured, fully alive.

When people connect with each other on the basis of a vision for who they are and what they could become; when we see in others what little of Jesus has already begun to form beneath the insecurity, fear and pride; when we long beyond anything else to see that little bit of Jesus develop and mature; then something is released from within us that has the power to form more of Jesus within them. That power is the life of Christ, carried into another soul across the bridge of our vision for them, a life that touches the life in another with nourishing power. Vision for others both bridges the distance between two souls and triggers the release of the power within us.⁷

Making Sure the Vision is “Caught”

Obviously, when communication breaks down, there could be a number of problems. The problem could be in transmission. As we have just seen, trying to transfer something before it is truly in your possession leads to a breakdown in communication. But sometimes the problem is in the reception. For example, God had a great vision that he wanted Moses to “catch.” But he encountered resistance when he communicated his vision to his reluctant servant. Through this story we learn a great deal about how to help those who don't buy into a vision when they first hear it. Despite Moses' initial strong resistance, God finally sold him on the vision.

Every leader occasionally faces seemingly impossible challenges. The opposition appears too strong, too entrenched and too well-organized. His or her own resources seem too small by comparison. That's how Moses must have felt when God appeared to him in the burning bush:

The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.... And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

Exodus 3:7-10

⁷ Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville: Word, 1997), p. 65.

Moses responded to God's call with three questions and an objection that expressed his unbelief and lack of confidence.

First, Moses asked, "Who am I?" (v. 11). That question revealed a radical change in Moses. Forty years earlier, Moses had impulsively taken it upon himself to vindicate a fellow Hebrew for a beating he had endured from an Egyptian (2:11-12). Now he felt inadequate for the task, even though God himself was commissioning him. God's response was exactly what Moses needed: "And God said, 'I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain'" (3:12). Moses would soon discover that one plus God equals a majority.

Moses' second question was, "What shall I tell them?" (v. 13). Demanding the release of over two million slaves was a tall order. Moses would need an authority higher than himself to persuade Pharaoh. Again God gave Moses what he needed: "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (v. 14). By calling himself "I AM," God revealed his identity as the eternal God who is always there for his people. He was the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac, a description that would resonate with the Hebrew slaves in Egypt.

Still unconvinced, Moses asked a third question: "What if they do not believe me?" (4:1). Moses no doubt remembered what had happened 40 years earlier. While Moses was trying to settle a dispute between two Hebrew men, one of them had scornfully asked, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" (2:14). With those words still echoing in his mind, it's understandable that Moses would fear rejection. But God told Moses that he would validate his leadership through a series of miracles that would convince even the most skeptical person in Egypt. As long as Moses stayed at God's side, he wouldn't have cause for worry.

With Moses' fourth and final objection, he implied that he wasn't qualified to lead the people to freedom because he wasn't an eloquent speaker (4:10). At this point Moses' fear of failure prevailed over his memory. So many years had passed since Moses had used his skills of persuasion that he thought he had lost them. Once more God responded to Moses with compassion. God promised to give him words to say and then deputized Aaron to help him:

The Lord said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say...What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be glad when he sees you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him."

Exodus 4:11-12, 14-16

Without question, Moses was one of the greatest leaders of world history. When God directed him to lead in a difficult situation, Moses hesitated before he obeyed – but he did obey. God showed Moses genuine understanding of his fears and concerns about what God wanted him to contribute to this overwhelming vision. God validated each of Moses' statements and addressed them. As Moses' concerns went away, so did his resistance to the vision. Like Moses, all leaders will occasionally face tough challenges, and seemingly impossible situations. At such times they need to follow Moses' lead: Assess the situation, take their fears to God, listen for his response and then obey.

How exactly did God lead Moses from resisting the vision of deliverance to leading it? Let's review the five points of resistance to the vision and God's response to each point.

"Who am I?" (3:11). This sense of being overwhelmed should accompany any well-formed vision statement. If the statement doesn't have a sense of the ridiculous about it, and if the hearers don't, at least initially, feel they

are in over their heads, then there is no challenge, no spark that calls them to stretch and push. But the strength of the vision statement will both stimulate and overcome resistance. “Who am I?” God said in effect, “I have called you and I am doing this. It’s not who *you* are, but who *I* am and what I want you to do” (3:1-12).

“What shall I tell them?” (3:13). This statement reflects the concerns of cost and value. “Who’s behind this?” “Who will accept the final responsibility for such an overwhelming vision?” Moses was looking for some authoritative back-up. So will the people within your organization. “What shall I tell them?” “Tell them I am with you in this because you are fulfilling what I want done” (3:14-22).

“What if they don’t believe me?” (4:1). Most people’s reactions to vision statements go from being overwhelmed (point 1), to legitimate skepticism (point 2), to serious investigation of legitimacy. If a vision is well-stated, people will demand evidence. “What if they don’t believe me?” “Doubts are to be expected when presenting a grand vision. Give them enough evidence and rationale to help them address their doubts” (4:2-9).

“O Lord, I have never been eloquent” (4:10). This reflects the painful fact that people have tried great and glorious projects in the past, only to be disappointed or embarrassed. But people eagerly desire to invest their time and effort in successful ventures and will be motivated to do their best if consistently empowered to do so. “O Lord, I have not been eloquent.” “Trust me and let me show you what I can do” (4:11).

“Send someone else” (4:13). Moses’ final resistance was, “Please, Lord, not me. I’m too overwhelmed. It’s just easier to stay where I am.” The leader who can effectively address this final appeal and get people excited about new possibilities will go a long way toward developing an effective team. “Send someone else.” God persuaded Moses, urging his reluctant messenger to get on with it and trust his faithfulness. There is a time for persuasion and selling the vision, and a time for pushing to get it done.

All of us have challenges, problems, fears and anxieties. We worry about the future, about the economy, about our families. As we get older, we become more aware of health issues and concerns about our own mortality. In such a context, we need to be assured of God’s vision for our lives. He does have a purpose for each of us, and we are immortal until his purpose is fulfilled.

For some, God’s vision may only require a few years to be fully realized. Others may live so long that they are tempted to become world-weary. Still, God has a specific vision for each of us as individuals. God has a two-fold plan for all of us – to be conformed to the image of his Son and to reproduce the life of Christ in others. Beyond that, however, God has a unique vision for each of his children, and nothing will infuse our lives with more meaning, purpose and fulfillment than investing them to make God’s vision a reality.